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Transcript of
Remarks of Commissioner Ervin S. Duggan

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

FCC Advisory Committee on Advanced Television Systems

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Washington, D.C.

I've often told Dick Wiley that I would like to have served on an FCC of which he was the Chairman; I have high regard for his gracious and warm ability to pull people together. So I'm delighted to be sitting, at least for a few minutes, with Dick Wiley in the Chairman's seat. Thank you very much, Dick.

The great graduate school of my life was to work at the White House early in my career. Occasionally, as a young man on the staff at the White House, I would meet some famous figure of history. I would find myself sitting by Thurgood Marshall, for example, or by a great figure of the New Deal who had played a historic role. When that happened, I would ask them questions as young, eager people often ask questions of older people. I was always struck by an interesting thing: Those people, when they were making history, did not have any great sense that they were making history. They felt that they were just doing a job: just trying to push forward and get the job done. It was only twenty or thirty years later that they realized that they had put their fingerprints on history.

I believe we should ration the use of the word "historic" in our own lives. I'm not sure that I've yet identified, for example, too many truly historic things that I have been part of. But I do think that the creation of digital HDTV may rank in the annals of this country and the world as a significant moment in technological and economic history. And I hope that you who have been so much a part of this process will have an adequate sense of mission and history about what is occurring here today. So it is on that note that I welcome you here on behalf of Chairman Quello and my colleagues Sherrie Marshall and Andy Barrett. In thanking you, I want to make a few observations, from our standpoint here at the Commission, about what we have arrived at and what is before us.

The first is that we mark today the vindication of a digital approach to HDTV. It is almost difficult to conceive that just a few years ago we considered this an impossibility. And yet we have pushed back the limits of possibility by developing a viable digital HDTV technology. The four systems that are still in the running do not defy the laws of physics: they simply push back the perceived limits of the laws of physics--- of what we once considered to be impossible. The emergence of these contending

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systems over the last three years has been a remarkable development. I think it is fitting to pause and take note that together, we have created something that was once considered impossible. I take note of it with a sense of gratitude to you in the room who have made it happen.

The second observation: This also marks a vindication of successful managed competition. We have put contenders into competition with one another; we have set benchmarks and deadlines; and--- lo and behold--- it has worked. That is a tribute to the leadership of Dick Wiley. Both in his tenure as Chairman and in his service to the public and this Commission afterward, he has made a great mark. But it is also a tribute to all of you in this room who--- albeit contenders, competitors, from different delivery systems, from different companies--- have managed to work in harness in the name of a greater good.

Occasionally the term "industrial policy" is used for what we are attempting here--- to describe the government's trying to harness the energies of private and public entities to make something happen. I would like to point out that if this is industrial policy, and if we do it in a way that is not coercive or insensitive to the marketplace, we will have created a good model for how industrial policy should be done. I don't think we should shrink from the phrase "industrial policy" if we are careful to do it in a non-coercive way that is sensitive to the marketplace.

My third observation is that I see emerging here the possibility of a worldwide standard--- a standard to which the wise and honest all over the globe may repair. Last week the European Community Commissioner for Industry announced that, in his view, the global battle over HDTV was effectively ended. Why? Because a technology developed here appeared to him to be destined for worldwide success. We can add to that the fact that in Japan, an analog system has been produced, but we are now moving decisively beyond that toward a digital standard.

Please note that I say developed "here"--- I do not mention the name of any country. I think it would be inappropriate to emphasize a single country--- it would seem protectionist or jingoistic. We need to think of this development as progress on behalf of people everywhere and nations everywhere--- a development on behalf of better standards of living for humanity. It would seem odd, wouldn't it, for Americans to go about claiming the incandescent light bulb as an American achievement. It is true that Thomas Alva Edison was responsible for its invention, and it is true that that invention happened in the United States. But the electric light bulb has since become a commodity for the world; it has enhanced living standards everywhere. It now belongs to humanity, and it would seem oddly discordant for us to go around cheering the light bulb as somehow the achievement of one nation.

We should have the same sense about this development--- that it is a development for everyone, everywhere. To the extent that we can suppress jingoistic and protectionist temptations, we will succeed in doing something good for humanity.

I'd like to end with an observation or two about the process. You have been focussed, until now, on getting this job finished; on getting to February 24--- on marking a truly significant milestone on this date. Deadlines have been very significant and very important to this process. Years ago, I was writing a book and having problems getting it finished. My editor in New York, who was very wise, said to me, "You are too focused on getting it right. Let's get it finished, and then we will get it right."

She went on to tell me, "I always have a problem with my writers. Some are too focused on getting it right, and not focused enough on getting it finished. Others are focused on getting it their manuscripts finished, but not concerned enough with getting them right. We always have to calibrate the right balance between getting a manuscript finished and getting it right. It is always possible to do both."

Up until now, we have been focused on getting HDTV finished. I think now may be a good time, however, to focus on slowing down a little bit so that we can get it right. I heartily endorse the idea of a pause for further testing. It seems to me appropriate, now that we've come so close to getting it finished, to take more time to get it right. I think it is precisely the right thing on behalf of this process and what we are trying to do for the marketplace--- and for humanity, if that doesn't sound too grandiose--- that we pause to do further testing and get it right.

I also heartily endorse--- and here I think I speak for all my colleagues at the FCC--- the idea of a grand alliance: of a blended system that will incorporate the best features of all contending systems. That would be a marvelous development.

Finally, I would like to caution everybody, as we drive toward getting it right and toward the marvelous possibility of a grand alliance, as Dick Wiley has so aptly called it, that we don't have too long a pause. Investment capital and energy will marshal around this new technological development, but they will only stand for so long a pause before they begin moving elsewhere. So I think that as we try to get it right, and as we try to probe the possibilities of a grand alliance, we need also to have a sense that any pause should be a relatively brief pause and a productive pause. We should drive toward the right conclusion, but we also should drive to a conclusion before much time has passed.

I find myself thinking today of that moment at the White House years ago when John F. Kennedy told a group of Nobel prize winners,

"Never has so much talent been gathered in this State Dining Room--- except for those occasions when Thomas Jefferson dined alone." Ladies and gentlemen, even Thomas Jefferson would be impressed if he could be among this company: you who collectively are so rich in expertise in management and technology; who have great vision and imagination; and who are bringing something truly new into being. Even Thomas Jefferson himself would be excited to be in this company on this day.

So on behalf of my colleagues, I want to thank you, to encourage you, and to add my word of endorsement for the possibility of a grand alliance that could be born here today.

I am here for a few minutes today. But all day long I will be thinking about what is going on here. And for a long time to come, my colleagues and I will be grateful to you for what you are achieving here. Thank you very much.

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